Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security

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Factsheet 9

UNITED NATIONS AND DISARMAMENT

Introduction

When the United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945, it was hoped that its creation would "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war." The maintenance of international peace and security is one of the major principles behind the United Nations and one of the ways this goal is to be pursued is through disarmament. Disarmament means the reduction and elimination of arms. Since 1945, the UN has developed extensive "disarmament machinery," a term which refers to the various UN bodies that deal with the question of disarmament. The more important of these are outlined below.

General Assembly

All states which are members of the United Nations have a seat in the General Assembly. Each state has one vote. The General Assembly is a deliberative body. This means it cannot enforce its decisions on states. Under the Charter of the United Nations, the General Assembly is given the power to consider "principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments." The General Assembly can debate issues, establish principles, make recommendations, and direct that research studies be carried out, but it does not negotiate treaties. The General Assembly expresses its views through resolutions. In 1946, the first resolution ever passed by the General Assembly called for the elimination of atomic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and the peaceful use of atomic energy. While this resolution did not lead to the elimination of such weapons, it clearly showed that the international community considered this issue to be extremely important.

Since the first disarmament resolution in 1946, the General Assembly has passed hundreds on this subject. In some cases, resolutions are passed which contain conflicting ideas and recommendations. In addition, states sometimes abstain from voting, or vote against some resolutions. These factors have reduced the impact of General Assembly resolutions on the course of disarmament initiatives.

Special Sessions of the United Nations

When the members of the United Nations view a particular issue as urgent, they may decide to hold a Special Session of the General Assembly. Normally, the General Assembly considers many issues each year. When a Special Session is held, the Assembly considers only the particular issue at hand. To date, the UN has held three Special Sessions on Disarmament (UNSSODs), in 1978, 1982 and 1988. The end product of UNSSOD I in 1978 was a 129-paragraph statement called the Final Document. The Final Document declared that security required an end to the arms race and a reduction in armaments. The final objective of the international community was stated to be "general and complete disarmament under effective international control." (This objective was first set out by the General Assembly in 1959.) Since 1978, the Final Document of UNSSOD I has served as a yardstick to measure movement in disarmament efforts. In 1982, UNSSOD II was unable to move much beyond the Final Document of UNSSOD I, and in 1988, UNSSOD III could not agree on any final statement at all.

First Committee

The First Committee is one of the seven main committees of the General Assembly. Since UNSSOD I, its sole task has been to consider questions of disarmament and international security matters. All members of the United Nations have a seat on the First Committee, and decisions are made by majority vote. The First Committee recommends draft resolutions to the General Assembly. This means that much of the work of drafting UN disarmament resolutions and gathering support for them occurs at this stage. The First Committee meets in the fall of each year.

Disarmament Commission

The Disarmament Commission has existed in its present form since UNSSOD I. All members of the United Nations have a seat on the Disarmament Commission, although unlike the General Assembly or First Committee, decisions are usually taken by consensus, not by vote. Consensus means that there must be general agreement from all participants; a simple majority is not enough. The Disarmament Commission considers matters of disarmament and makes recommendations to the General Assembly. It also has the job of following up the decisions of special sessions on disarmament. Its work often overlaps with that of the First Committee. The Commission meets in the spring of each year.

Ad Hoc Committees

An ad hoc committee is established to deal with a particular issue

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as it arises. For instance, in 1972, the General Assembly established the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean to study a proposal to make the region a zone of peace.

Department for Disarmament Affairs

The Department for Disarmament Affairs is a part of the UN Secretariat, or civil service. The Department carries out research on disarmament matters, and prepares numerous publications. It also provides administrative support for UN disarmament conferences and bodies.

Conference on Disarmament

The Conference on Disarmament (CD) has existed in various forms since 1959. Its current form was established by the General Assembly at UNSSOD I. The Conference on Disarmament meets in Geneva each year for approximately six months. The CD has 40 members, including the five nuclear weapon states (US, USSR, China, France, United Kingdom). Unlike the UN machinery described above, the Conference on Disarmament is a forum for negotiations among its participants. The goal of these negotiations is to produce treaties on particular disarmament issues. Recently, the CD has spent much of its time on a treaty to ban the production of chemical weapons. The CD reports to the General Assembly and receives its budget from the United Nations, but it establishes its own agenda and is not bound by United Nations decisions.

Conclusions

Despite the many resolutions and speeches in the United Nations which have stressed the importance of disarmament, these words have not generally been matched by actions. While there are numerous reasons for this, several are particularly worth noting.

As seen above, UN negotiations leading to treaties on arms reductions and disarmament are undertaken only at the Conference on Disarmament. When two or more states decide it is in their interests to negotiate a disarmament treaty, they have tended to do so among themselves, outside the UN forums. For instance, the recent treaty on eliminating intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF Treaty) was negotiated by the United States and the Soviet Union; the UN was not involved. This was also the case for both Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT I & II). In these cases, the only states directly involved in the negotiations were the possessors of the weapons being discussed. While all states have an interest in the outcome of such negotiations, the principal states often prefer to deal directly with each other alone.

The resolutions and principles adopted by the General Assembly may sometimes contradict each other, or the issues they address may overlap. Because of this, it would be difficult to translate such resolutions into treaties. Resolutions or statements that are accepted by consensus (as was the case, for example, at UNSSOD I and II), also often contain language that is so general that it would be difficult to turn it into treaties, which need to be clear and precise.

The United Nations does not lend itself easily to treaty negotiations. With almost all the states in the world taking part in most UN disarmament bodies, so many opinions and approaches are brought to bear on disarmament issues that agreement among all is nearly impossible. It was for this reason that the one component of UN disarmament machinery that does negotiate treaties, the Conference on Disarmament, was set up with only a limited but representative membership. When the international community does manage to agree on a disarmament issue or measure through the UN, that agreement carries considerable weight.

In the disarmament field, the UN has served most often as a forum to present new ideas and approaches to disarmament and to give those ideas legitimacy, recognition, and, especially when agreed by consensus, the weight of world opinion. For instance, the former Canadian prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, took the opportunity of UNSSOD I to call for a "strategy of suffocation" of the nuclear arms race. This strategy suggested measures which would limit qualitative improvements in nuclear arms and cut off the nuclear arms race at its source.

Especially for states which do not participate in the arms talks carried out by major powers, the UN provides opportunities to put forward concerns and opinions on disarmament. At the same time, UN studies and research can often bring international attention to disarmament issues.

The efforts of the United Nations in the field of disarmament are a reminder of the importance of disarmament to the entire international community, and also of the difficulties in achieving progress in the limitation and reduction of arms.

FURTHER READING

United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs, *The Conference on Disarmament*, Fact Sheet no. 46, United Nations, New York, 1986.

United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs, *Disarmament Machinery: How the United Nations carries out its disarmament responsibilities*, Fact Sheet no. 35, United Nations, New York, 1984.

United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs, *The United Nations and Disarmament: 1945-1985*, United Nations, New York, 1985.

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